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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001974

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUMBLATT TELL A/S WELCH MARCH 14 MORE
UNITED THAN EVER

REF: BEIRUT 1950

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch assured Druse leader Walid Jumblatt and other senior Druse officials of unwavering U.S. support for March 14 during his December 15-16 visit to Lebanon. Stressing the need for March 14 to remain united, he said the U.S. would support whichever course the majority decided to take on the presidential election. Jumblatt affirmed that March 14 was more united than ever, and, with the nomination of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman, had secured the support of the army and church as well. March 14 continued to resist a package deal on the presidency, which Jumblatt viewed as a Syrian attempt to block the Special Tribunal.

2. (C) Jumblatt also confirmed that March 14 was not considering a half plus one vote at this time. Instead, it was looking for ways to consolidate PM Siniora's government by boosting its Christian representation, and seeking external financial support to weather the weeks ahead. Jumblatt also stressed the need for more international pressure on Syria, arguing that U.S. sanctions had not been effective. End summary.

3. (C) Druse leader Walid Jumblatt hosted a dinner for visiting NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch on December 15 that included his wife Nora, Telecom Minister Marwan Hamadeh, Information Minister and MP Ghazi Aridi, MP Henri Hilou, Charge Bill Grant, Deputy Legal Advisor Jonathan Schwartz, NEA Staff Assistant, Pol/Econ Chief, and Senior FSN Political Advisor.

A/S WELCH REASSURES WALID

4. (C) A/S Welch told the dinner guests that his visit had three purposes: 1) To reassure the March 14 majority of unwavering U.S. support; 2) to give Washington a better understanding of the situation on the ground; and 3) to

discuss the way forward. As he understood the situation, there were three options: The first option is to pursue a half plus one majority president; the second is to proceed with the election, perhaps with some agreement on how to amend the constitution; and the third is to continue with the status quo, in which the Siniora government holds presidential powers in the absence of a new president.

¶15. (C) Replaying what he had told Speaker Berri earlier in the day, A/S Welch stressed that the U.S. had not sent a high level official to Lebanon earlier because it did not want to get into the name game on the presidency. He told Berri that the election should occur on December 17.

¶16. (C) His message to March 14 was that it needed to remain united, disciplined, coordinated and prudent. It should not go from one extreme to the other, i.e., one minute nominate a consensus candidate and the next opt for a half plus one president. The U.S. would support whichever course March 14 decided to pursue, but it needed to know what that course was.

HOW WE GOT HERE

¶17. (C) Recapping the events since his last meeting with A/S Welch in Washington, Jumblatt said that because March 14 was unable to secure the Patriarch's blessing and because rumors were rampant that local militias were rearming, March 14 decided pursuing a half plus one majority for the presidency was too risky.

¶18. (C) Then came the French initiative, "a waste of time," Jumblatt said. The French learned their lessons, he said, and realize now that the initiative was doomed from the beginning by giving a role to Syrian President Asad. They

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admitted to us they were being used, Hamadeh added.

¶19. (C) Instead, as a result of consultations between Jumblatt, PM Fouad Siniora, and majority leader Saad Hariri just prior to the midnight November 23 expiration of President Emile Lahoud's mandate, March 14 decided to pursue the consensus candidacy of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman. The Patriarch approved this plan, and Lebanese Armed Forces leader Samir Geagea begrudgingly came around to the idea as well.

ASSASSINATION AIMED AT
UNDERMINING MARCH 14 UNITY

¶10. (C) Now, Jumblatt said, March 14 has the church and the army behind it. March 14 was more united than ever now that there was no internal fighting on who should be its candidate. Unfortunately, the "bloody answer" to the decision to elect Sleiman was the December 12 assassination of LAF G-3 Operations Director Francois al-Hajj (reftel), a move Jumblatt said was intended to intimidate the army, the Patriarch, and March 14. And the army, he noted solemnly, is the only institution that can confront Hizballah.

HOLDING FIRM AGAINST PACKAGE DEAL

¶11. (C) Despite March 14's agreement to a consensus candidate, as Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri had demanded, it now appeared the Syrians had told Berri he must secure agreement on the political process as well, in particular by getting Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun on board. By obstructing the election, either Berri is only pretending to support Sleiman or he is not free to decide and is using Aoun as an excuse, he concluded.

¶12. (C) This is backwards, Jumblatt protested. First we

elect the president, then we decide on cabinet formation and program. And we must respect basic issues such as international resolutions and the Special Tribunal, he stressed. Berri's insistence on not going through the cabinet to amend the constitution was aimed at undermining the legitimacy of all of the government's actions regarding the Tribunal. The Shia leadership will never accept the Tribunal, Jumblatt stated. Hamadeh agreed, adding this was why Aoun had his eye on the Justice Ministry. Bypassing the government would be "political suicide" for March 14, Jumblatt said.

HALF PLUS ONE OPTION NOT ON
THE TABLE -- AT LEAST FOR NOW

¶13. (C) Jumblatt said pursuing the half plus one option now would be a big political error. Sleiman would think March 14 had been joking with him, and March 14 would lose the support of the army and the church. But he stressed that the president needed to be elected before December 31, the end of the current legislative session, or Lebanon risked not having a president to send to the March Arab League Summit in Damascus.

MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO

¶14. (C) To prepare for a longer presidential vacuum, Jumblatt said PM Siniora should consolidate his government by appointing a Christian minister to replace assassinated Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel. Amine Gemayel was the logical choice, and Jumblatt did not believe he would refuse. Meanwhile, the Saudis should deposit \$1 billion or more in Lebanon's Central Bank to counter expected pressure on the Lebanese pound if the presidential vacuum continues. A gesture from Saudi Arabia would be helpful, he said.

STEPPING UP PRESSURE ON SYRIA

¶15. (C) Jumblatt, commenting that the Syrians were counting on time, asked what more the U.S. could do to intimidate

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Syria? Sanctions weren't enough, people just put their money elsewhere; meanwhile, everyone was investing in Syria, so President Asad was comfortable. Turkish PM Erdogan had told President Asad to facilitate the election, and received no reply, he said. The Egyptians had offered to send Chief of Intelligence Omar Suleiman, but didn't follow through.

¶16. (C) A/S Welch responded that the U.S. had imposed nearly every sanction possible against Syria, but that, because the U.S. had no economic ties with Syria, the sanctions had little effect. What was needed, he said, was for the Europeans to support U.S. sanctions, adding that even European political sanctions would be useful.

¶17. (C) If you can't weaken Syria, strengthen Lebanon, Hamadeh suggested. The perception is that the U.S. is less interested than before. That, coupled with the confusion caused by the French initiative, which completely disheartened the Patriarch, nearly destroyed March 14 unity, and reintroduced Syria into Lebanese politics, brings us back to the pre-2005 era, before Syrian troops were forced to withdraw. We need your strong political support, as well as economic support, he said.

¶18. (C) A/S Welch said the U.S. would discuss this with others on the margins of the December 17 Palestinian donors' conference in Paris, he said. He also confirmed that the U.S. would continue its military assistance to Lebanon.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT
ON ANNAPOLIS, NIE ON IRAN

¶19. (C) In response to Nora Jumblatt's concerns that Syrian participation at the Annapolis conference and the recently released National Intelligence Estimate on Iran were signs of U.S. softening toward these two countries, A/S Welch stressed that this was not the case. Annapolis was a regional conference that focused on the Palestinian-Israeli track, not the Syrian-Israeli track. Syria's inclusion on the agenda was meaningless, merely giving it the opportunity to make a speech, he explained, just like Indonesia. The NIE report basically said that Iran had locked the gun in the closet, but was still making bullets.

COMMENT

¶20. (C) Jumblatt's appreciation of A/S Welch's reassurances of U.S. support was visible, as was the case with other March 14 leaders. After weeks of sliding into what his allies saw as a "defeatist" attitude that only played to the advantage of the opposition and Syria, weakening March 14 in the process, Jumblatt is on the rebound. While more in line with Saad and Siniora on the half plus one option than Geagea, who appears to be a bit ahead of the pack, Jumblatt appears to be no longer in the mood for making concessions, especially when it comes to Berri's efforts to delegitimize the Siniora government, clearly a red line for March 14. End comment.

¶21. (U) A/S Welch has not cleared this cable.
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